

ANDALUCÍA

Your 32-page guide to the region's history, culture, nature and activities

*Here the beach ends when you decide to go back

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Cádiz



Spanish Contribution
2012

Andalucía
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Andalucía

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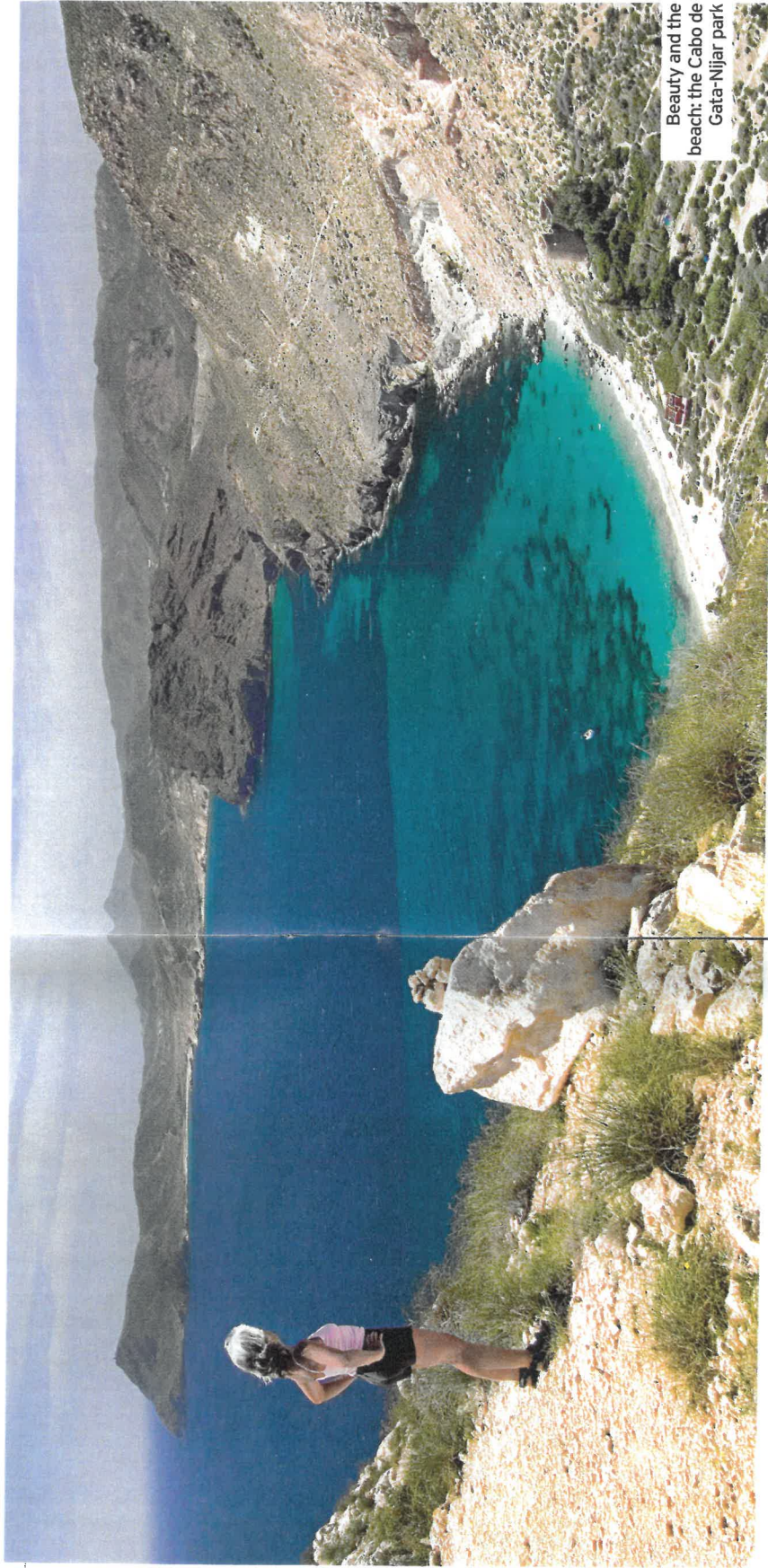
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Beauty and the beach: the Cabo de Gata-Níjar park

A REGION OF

SUMPTUOUS VARIETY

a dip in the sea in the afternoon? Then there are tall mountains and deep gorges, rare animals and revered artworks, plus a range of healthy outdoor activities to satisfy all ages. Sunshine, too – more than 3,000 hours a year in some parts.

The thick strip across the bottom of Spain is Andalucía, one of the country's autonomous communities (region rolls easier off the tongue).

There are restaurants that serve dishes made to old family recipes and hikes along earth-splitting canyons. And on 500 miles of coast, you can find endless fun for the kids or a lonely cove all to yourself.

Andalucía's cities are grand, noble and usually ancient, each

with a glorious architectural legacy. Seville and Granada are the queens, but less-known cities such as Córdoba, Almería and Málaga each have a rich mix of castles, palaces, churches and squares.

Andalucía boasts four distinct costas (coasts). To the west is the Costa de la Luz, with huge sweeps of Atlantic sands and the immense wetlands of the Doñana National Park. In the middle, the famously friendly resorts of the Costa del Sol. To the east, the Mediterranean costas of Tropical and Almería have unspoilt fishing villages tucked between lovely bays and mountains.

The entire north of the region has fabulous wooded hills and

craggy peaks – heaven for hikers or horse-riders. In the centre there are the tallest mountains in Western Europe outside the Alps, in the Sierra Nevada; the fascinating desert at Tabernas where spaghetti westerns were filmed; and the gorgeous "white towns" that cling to the hillsides in the provinces of Cádiz and Málaga.

On my latest visit to Andalucía, I watched deer and flamingoes roaming free among marshes, drove up to precarious viewpoints, walked through cobbled lanes, was inspired by majestic architecture, wandered beside mountain streams, admired artworks by great masters and visited many natural marvels.

And still enjoyed delicious regional cuisine – and a dash of flamenco.

My advice? Take a week or two and explore by car, perhaps staying in the excellent network of paradors. But if the glorious beaches form a large part of your holiday, do take a few days out to discover what may be the most sumptuously varied single region of Europe.

For lots more information and ideas, visit the following websites:
www.telegraph.co.uk/andalucia
www.andalucia.org
www.spain.info

You can share photos, videos, links and personal experiences at www.ineedspain.com

REGIONAL FOCUS

Andalucía is divided into eight provinces, each of which is detailed over the next 16 pages. For more information on what to see and do across the region, visit www.andalucia.org and www.spain.info



WILDLY INSPIRING FOR TRUE EXPLORERS

A national park, great walking and the legacy of Columbus are all here to be discovered



I looked out across the immense, silent wetlands and could see nothing apart from marsh grass – not even a speck of civilisation on the distant horizon. Then movement; two antlered heads popped up about 100 yards away. Then sound; a duck splashed in the reeds at my feet.

The Doñana National Park is one of Europe's great wildernesses, occupying – with its buffer zone – an incredible 500 square miles. Marshes, hemmed by dunes and forested scrub, create a Unesco-listed habitat for copious wildlife. Hundreds of species of birds such as flamingoes and eagles are visitors or residents, while the mammal count includes, as well as the deer I saw, the Iberian lynx – the only place they still survive.

I met scientist and photographer Héctor Garrido at a research station deep within Doñana. He told me that a good way to really get a feel for the beauty of this vast park is to take a guided tour in a special truck from the visitor centre at Acebuche.

The trip takes guests alongside miles of untouched beach and dunes, with a chance to take a walk close to the mouth of the River Guadalquivir, eyes permanently peeled for those rare creatures.

For those who have less time, there are boardwalk trails with observation hides at the visitor centres and paths from the village of El Rocio on the park's flank. I tried both but ended my birdwatching the lazy way – with a beer outside a café overlooking a lagoon, where



In the pink: flamingoes and empty beach at Doñana, statue of Columbus



that make wonderful walking country, with marked routes that are suitable for all abilities.

The town of Aracena makes an immediate visual impact, with a hilltop 13th-century church that forms a cornerstone of the remains of a Moorish castle. The walk up from the town centre was not as daunting as it appeared and I took the track round the summit for a 360-degree panorama.

Deep inside this same hill lies an even bigger attraction, the Gruta de

la Maravillas (Grotto of Marvels), a network of caves with the entrance in the town's main street.

Chambers, galleries and flowing water are all lit up to enhance some stupendous geological features.

Back down near the sea I drove into Huelva, one of the least-known provincial capitals of Andalusia. Its industrial outskirts are unpromising, but the centre has a good mix of cafés and shops, so is well worth a few hours. There's a peculiar side to the city. I walked along to the Barrio

Reina Victoria, a housing estate built in 1916 to make the Rio Tinto mining company's British workers feel at home in a neat collection of cottages and bungalows. They've been "Spanicised" over the years, but it's still an intriguing diversion. It was from close to the city that Huelva's most famous adopted son, Christopher Columbus, set sail for the New World with local crewmen.

La Rábida, across the river from the city, serves as a sort of one-stop shop for fascinating encounters.

There's the Muelle de las Carrabelas, a museum with full-scale replicas of Columbus's three ships, a fine 15th-century monastery and a beautiful botanical garden.

Inevitably, there's a statue of "Cristóbal" himself and from the pier below you can admire the much larger one on the opposite bank of the Tinto, all of 110ft tall. It got me thinking, Columbus may have left Huelva province for his explorations, but there's plenty to discover right here.

SEDUCED BY GRANDEUR

From gigantic monuments to tiny tapes, you will find delights galore in and near the capital



Seville, the grand old dame of Andalucía, teases visitors. Her greatest treasures are boldly displayed, yet I found that it's only by slipping off the well-trod trail that the many layers of the city are peeled back.

The phenomenal cathedral, with its heroic Giralda bell tower, is plonked square at the heart of the region's capital. It has stood anciently defiant for centuries and continues to do so even as futuristic trans purr by its mighty walls.

I walked right around this Gothic-Renaissance monument and appreciated why, by most calculations, it is the largest church in the world. Inside, it is even more impressive, with enough artworks and icons to keep a historian happy for days, plus the tomb of explorer Christopher Columbus.

The 346ft Giralda is a remnant of the mosque that stood on this site before the Christian reconquest. King Alfonso X couldn't bear to tear down such a majestic tower and you will find the same impulse as I did to scale its ramps (not stairs – no good for horses) to the top.

Right next door, hidden behind rough stone walls, are the glories of the Alcázar, the royal palace that dates back to the 10th century. Much expanded and reconstructed over the centuries, it incorporates

the finest Mudéjar architecture. Again, there are enough artefacts to fill a book, let alone the remarkable decoration, but for me the most enticing aspect is the exquisite gardens, replete with exotic flora and water features.

My favourite Seville landmark, however, lies a short walk east. The Plaza de España, a semi-circle of theatrical buildings with a canal surrounding the half-moon patio, looks far older than its 84 years, when it was built for a trade fair. Ostentatious it may be but the exquisite tilework, especially on the bridges and the alcoves representing each of Spain's provinces, cannot fail to impress.

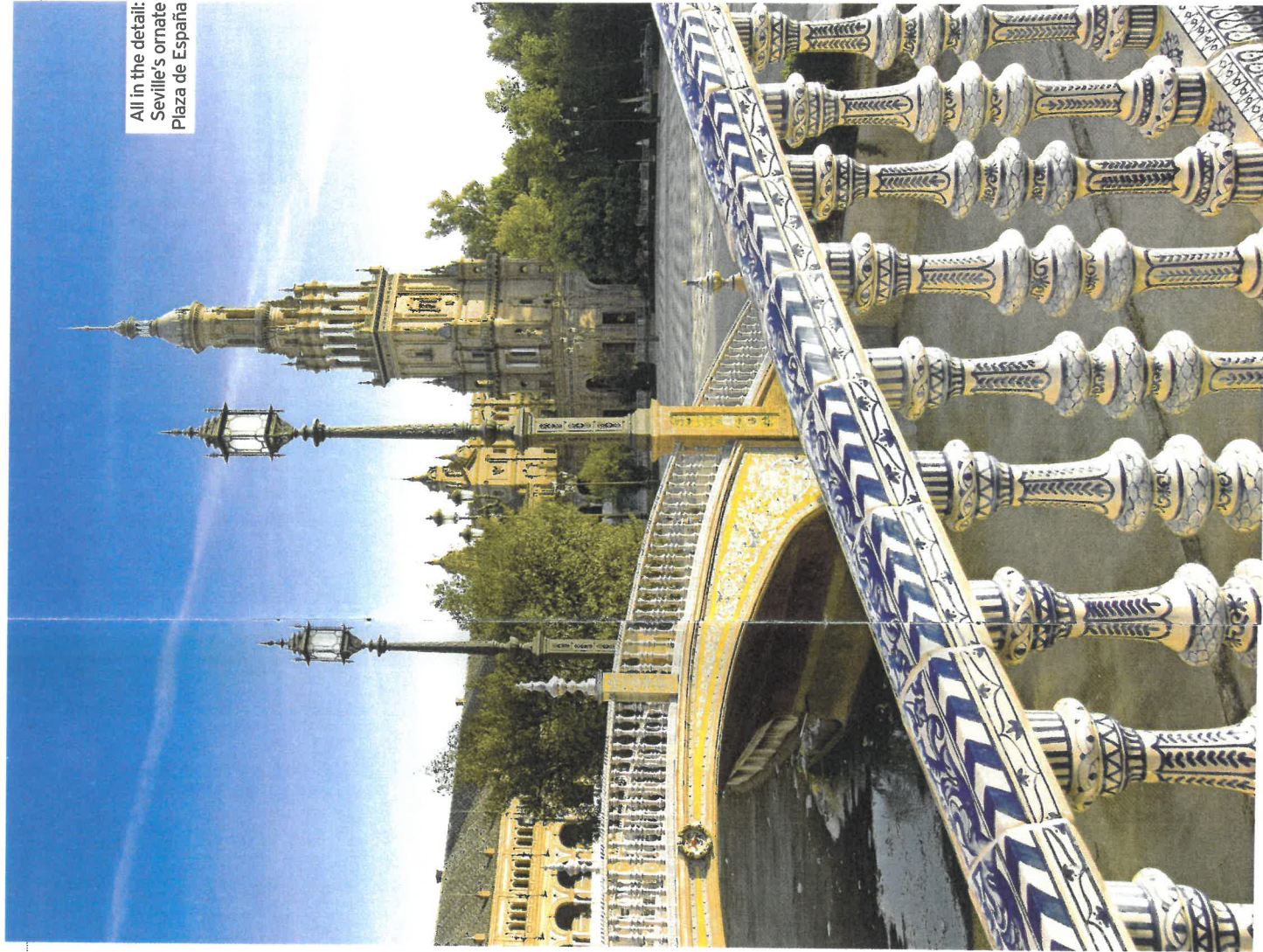
Its cathedral may be enormous but another of Seville's claims to fame is tiny: tapes. The small-dish treats were invented here and a "crawl" of the tapes bars – some gloriously old-fashioned – is ingrained into Sevillano society.

I wandered through the zig-zag alleys of the Barrio Santa Cruz, eyeing the chalked-up menus, and ended up in the earthy district of Macarena, where hidden plazas were boisterous with a public holiday crowd of locals.

The tapes bars, some of which host performances of the city's legendary flamenco, are a delight and I settled back with mini-portion of anchovies with cheese and pork with dates, washed down with a manzanilla sherry.

For a different perspective, I crossed the wide, lazy Guadalquivir river that skirts the city centre to a riverside bar in the Triana district to watch rowers practising against

All in the detail: Seville's ornate Plaza de España



a backdrop of the splendid bullring and the Moorish Torre del Oro.

A 90-minute drive north of Seville lies one of the most picturesque and least-visited areas of Andalucía, the Sierra Norte. As the road climbed, I passed a surprising variety of trees sprouting from rich red earth, roamed by long-horned cattle. My journey was held up only by the harvesting of oranges from the trees that lined a village main street.

Cazalla de la Sierra was my destination, spread across a lonely slope, where I negotiated the intricate web of cobbled streets to the huge, cube-shaped stone sentinel of the main church.

Driving back along a picturesque smaller lane, I spotted a sign for an area *recreativo*: the Isla Margarita, a long, forested island between two tumbling streams. On a bright January afternoon, I had this idyllic place to myself.

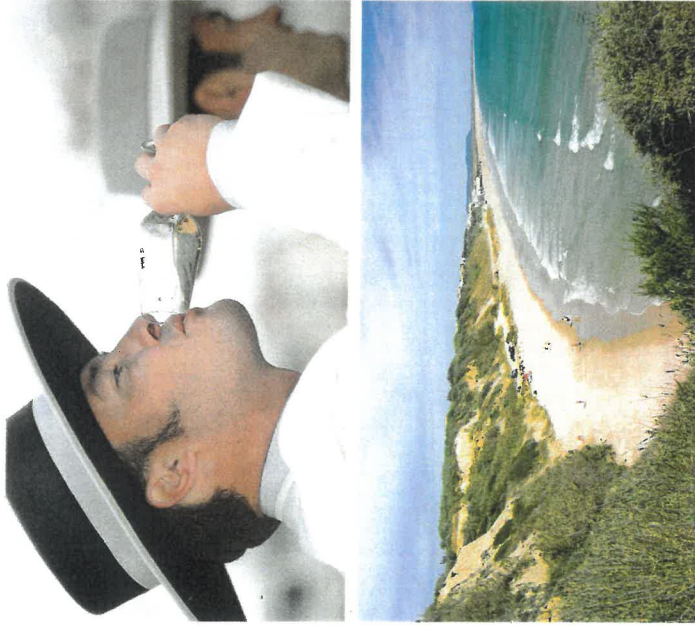
This certainly wasn't the case that evening. The history-crammed streets of Carmona, 20 miles east of Seville, were fizzing with humanity for the Epiphany parade, with everyone from toddlers to grandmas eager to grab the candy thrown from a mile-long procession of floats. Fantastical creatures and fairy-tale castles, along with marching bands, paraded before me, while the waiters in the bars worked at blurring speed. The next morning those same streets were so quiet you could have heard the rustle of a single sweet wrapper.

Don't wait for a fiesta to visit Carmona, as it's an absolute gem. You enter the old town through a fortress-like Roman double arch and if you walk high enough will come out to views that stretch for dozens of miles.

Just outside the town walls is the San Pedro church. Its tall belfry seemed familiar to me. Turns out it's a replica of sorts of Seville's Giralda. Here, imitation was a very handsome form of flattery.

BALANCE OF SHERRY,

SAND AND SIERRA



Having the edge:
Arcos de la Frontera;
left, sherry in Jerez,
Costa de la Luz beach

**Travel from
empty beach to
remote peaks
via fascinating
cliff-top towns
and fine cities**



Never mind the dangerous bend, I just had to stop the car. Pulling in to the verge, I grabbed my camera and pointed it across the valley.

A mile away, illuminated in burnt orange by the sunset, was Arcos de la Frontera, its castle and churches on the very edge of a great cliff.

Minutes later I climbed a steep street and was sucked into the labyrinth of the old town, one of the most atmospheric in Andalucía. Up in the Plaza del Cabildo, I stood

on a terrace on the same cliff and took in far-reaching views, then turned around to admire a close-up view of the castle walls and basilica of the Santa Maria church.

The lanes of the old town twist along the ridge through a variety of architectural styles, with alleys dropping away down the slope at alarming gradients. I found myself at the precipitous church of San Pedro, the interior of which has some notable paintings and statues.

From Arcos, I sped down to Jerez de la Frontera, regretting that I only had time for a quick sip of fino in the genteel home of sherry, on my way to provincial capital Cádiz.

The city is crushed on to a finger-like peninsula, creating a natural harbour that has been important to

Spanish trade for many centuries. Often overlooked by tourists, the old town on the "nail" of the finger deserves a day, not least for the colossal Catedral Nueva.

Again, I think I got the best first impression, from along the sea wall. Even though I was looking at the building – one of Spain's largest churches – from the rear, its twin towers and golden dome still had a powerful visual impact.

So large is the main façade that the square in front seems Lilliputian. The widest angle of my zoom lens couldn't cope. I was pleased to find that you can climb up one of the bell towers for all-round vistas of the city, dazzling white in the sun.

Close by, the Museo de Cádiz has one of Andalucía's best collections,

with Phoenician and Roman artefacts and not least a number of important artworks by the master Francisco de Zurbarán.

Walking through the picturesque pedestrianised shopping lanes, admiring the different forms of balconies that are close enough to share whispered gossip across the street, I found myself in the small Plaza de las Flores, which as the name implies is full of flower stalls.

I couldn't resist browsing the indoor fish and fruit market in the adjacent square, where vendors were slicing up giant sides of the tuna for which this coast is famous.

Cádiz has its own decent beaches to the east but sand-seekers should head further down the coast along the Costa de la Luz (Coast of Light).

Once past the urbanity of San Fernando, the beaches roll out all the way to Tarifa at Spain's southernmost point.

At the hamlet of El Palmar, I sauntered back along the flat sands towards the seaside resort of Conil, an expanse backed by low dunes and a solitary old watchtower, and thought: you could put ten thousand people on this beach and still it wouldn't be crowded. And it's far from the only one like it along this most inviting stretch of Atlantic coast.

From back in the hills at Arcos, I headed east and soon my windscreen was filled with the spiky mountains of the Sierra de Grazalema. Passing a couple of villages nestling in green bowls,

I arrived at Grazalema town, occupying a slope above a ridge at the head of a valley. After gazing at the classic "white town" rooftop views, I descended to the centre, thinking that I could happily spend a few days in this gorgeous spot.

Doubling back slightly, I took a small road north towards Zahara de la Sierra – and was jolly glad I did. This is one of the most spectacular drives in Spain, on a narrow but safe road that winds up to the Puerto de las Palomas, a mountain pass at 3,800ft. There's a stone mirador that is so high I could see birds of prey soaring way below me.

To the west, the vistas vanished into infinity; to the east, more rugged mountains beckoned my next adventure...

WHERE TO FIND REAL ROCK STARS

There's far more to Málaga province than an airport and the sunny seaside resorts



Where can you find a bullet train, an Easter Island statue and, er, John Prescott in one place in Spain?

I hadn't even started on the sherry when I went to El Torcal de Antequera. At the top of a mountain north of Málaga city, it's a geological fantasy land where millions of years of weathering have teased a limestone landscape into an astonishing gallery of weird shapes.

Apparently, school groups are encouraged to find familiar identities among the rocks, which take the form of pillars, corkscrews and even, in the case of a formation declared a national monument, a stack of American pancakes.

From the visitor centre, I took the shortest waymarked trail of about a mile, scrambling along the rough path into a valley that was like something out of a *Star Wars* set, so surreal were the surroundings.

Another natural phenomenon occurs in the west of the province. It would be easy to dismiss Ronda as just another very attractive "white town" were it not for the extraordinary gorge that slices it apart. The *tajo* is the overwhelming feature of this ancient town and it should be pondered, along with its grand bridge, from all possible

'School groups are encouraged to find familiar identities among the rocks... it's a geological fantasy land'

Looking in good shape: limestone formations at El Torcal; the Picasso Museum, Málaga; the Balcon de Europa viewpoint at Nerja



angles, yet the town has plenty more that is usually overlooked by the day-trippers. There are pockets of history everywhere – the fact that the Puente Nuevo (New Bridge) was built in 1751 says it all.

After spending half an hour peering nervously over the side of the bridge into the chasm, I went to explore, finding Renaissance palaces, the 200-year-old bullring – one of the most revered in Spain – Arab baths and good museums.

If Ronda is something of a show-off, then Málaga is not, yet it should make more of a fuss of its attributes. To many, Málaga is the airport gateway to the vibrant resorts of the Costa del Sol. Having spent a day and night in the city, I'd recommend that everyone uses a little of their holiday exploring, especially as the main sights are within the throw of a matador's cloak of each other (the bullring is another of Spain's most notable).

A great place to start is the hilltop Gibralfaro Castle, a stiff walk up a stone path. The 14th-century fortress is easily the best place in town for views from its battlements, while inside there is a small museum including a scale model of the city as it was in Moorish times.

Below, and linked to the castle by a narrow strip of land between tall, zig-zag walls, is the Alcazaba, which predates the castle by some 300 years. It looks formidable from the outside but within the walls and bastions, it's a picturesque and peaceful place with orange trees

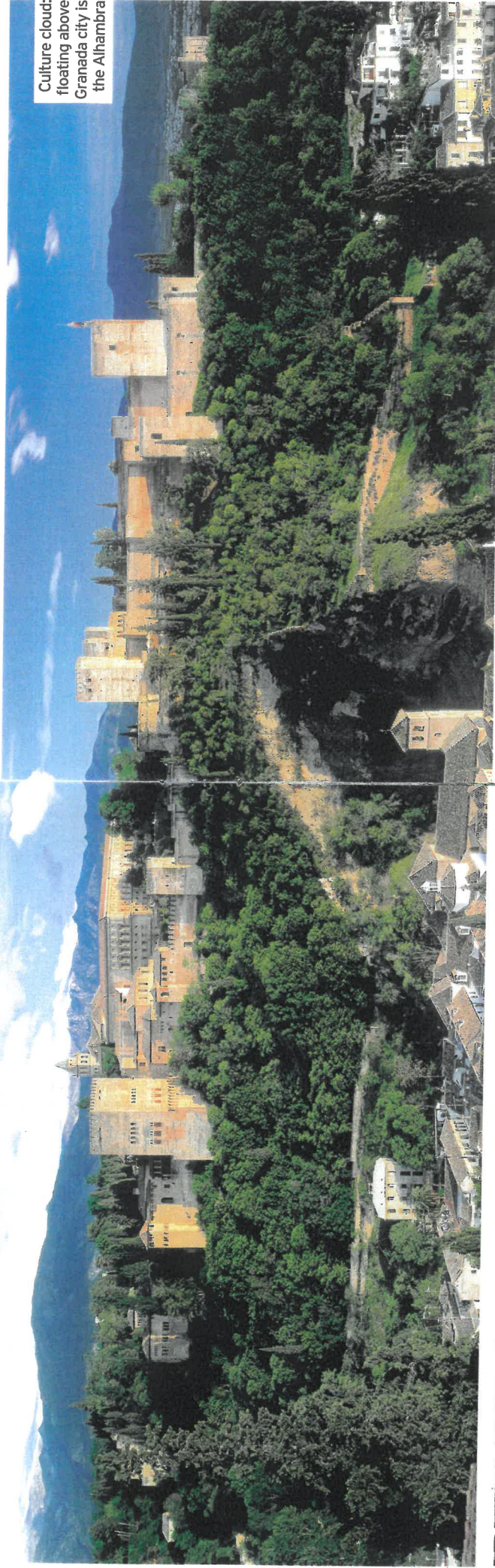
and green shrubbery and the elegant courtyards of the palace.

Down in the city centre, I felt obliged to visit the Picasso Museum. Málaga was his birthplace and although he never went back after the age of 19, the city remains proud of the cubist. I'm not the biggest fan of contemporary art but I emerged from the extensive collection with a fresh perspective; the more you stare at Picasso's art, the more you appreciate his genius. You can also visit the artist's home in a nearby square.

Round the corner is the cathedral, a powerful presence in the old town. Finally finished in 1782 in Renaissance style, it is rich in detail, its main façade a grid of columns, arches and stone carvings. It is, however, lopsided as the second bell tower – your mind wants to sketch it in – is missing, never built because a maverick bishop found another cause for the cash.

If you come seeking sunshine, try turning east rather than west out of Málaga airport. Not only are the resorts at this end of the Costa del Sol more spaced out, but they give ready access to one of Andalucía's great secrets, the Axarquía.

From the seaside town of Nerja I ventured north into a great valley, where white towns such as Cómpeta and Frigiliana match their famous counterparts to the west in beauty, set below some seriously large mountains. Yet more evidence that there's much more to Málaga province than an airport.



Culture cloud: floating above Granada city is the Alhambra

PERFECT PORTRAYAL

Spain's historic kingdom and lovely villages lie beneath a range of snowy mountains

There are few places as beckoning as the Alpujarras when approached from the south. On the drive up, the whitewashed villages play hide-and-seek, one minute appearing to sneak out from behind a ridge on the mountainside, the next moment sitting proudly, and spectacularly high, on the slope beneath a gigantic peak.

The three superstars are Pampaneira, Bubión and Capileira, which ascend like polished steps towards the highest points in mainland Spain. Tourism has had

an effect here but the villages remain perfect examples of rural Andalucía, in the most immaculate setting in the southern foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

I first crossed to Lanjarón, an agreeable one-street town whose spring waters are drunk nationwide. There's a splendid old spa here, fed by six mineral springs and where an array of liquid therapies can be tried.

But it's the Poquiera Gorge, with its three glistening *pueblos*, that captivated me. From up here on a clear day, some claim to be able to see the mountains of Africa. I couldn't, but there was plenty else to beguile me, not least the walks along the gorge with the peaks of Veleta and the 11,400ft Mulhacén wearing white capes above.

Take the road round to the west of the Sierra Nevada and you'll

come to Granada, home of the most important single historical site in Spain. Here, in the 13th century, the Moors chose to create an extraordinary monument that remains virtually intact today.

The Alhambra is a one-off, hovering like a mirage from a glorious past on a hill just above the city. Its fortress, palaces, church and monastery are each deserving of serious attention, so to find them all within the same formidable walls is remarkable. The range of architecture and decoration here is breathtaking, especially in the exquisite Nasrid palaces where I was mesmerised by the intricacy of the wall carving and mosaic work, and the genius of a design that allows an ethereal light to float through the rooms and patios.

It would fill an encyclopedia to

OF A NOBLE PAST

detail all the Alhambra's treasures, but to record the place in a single image in the mind, go up to the equally splendid Generalife palace and gardens, slanted across the narrow valley, and look back at the complex, honey-gold against the backdrop of the white city. Better still, view it from the San Nicolas mirador up in the old town, with the snowy peaks behind. Those are views I won't forget easily.

With such a rich experience, it would be easy to overlook the rest of Granada city, so I walked down to seek out other possibilities.

In the narrow streets around the cathedral, I heard mournful singing and the unmistakable chords of flamenco guitar. I followed the sound to find a busker, an elderly gent whose earnest voice and fluid playing created a haunting ambience

name denotes Arab origins but the most strident feature is the yawning canyon, on the edge of which the town abruptly ends.

I walked through the old quarter to the picturesque 16th-century church of Carmen, from where there is a wide-angle view of this natural wonder. I noted the various paths down and through the chasm, something that will have my full attention on my next visit.

Driving through the north part of the canyon brought me to the town's Bañerío, where a smart spa hotel takes full advantage of ancient thermal springs. The hotel – which houses original Muslim baths – was closed, but a few local families were enjoying bathing in the river, in early January, where the warm, therapeutic waters exit the building. Very Moorish.

in front of the huge church, with its impressive Baroque façade.

Close by in the old town, in the shadow of the Alhambra's Alcazaba fortress, I came across the Arab Baths, an important social meeting place 900 years ago, and today's equivalent, the authentic tapas cafés by the small river.

Granada's Moorish past remains a strong influence and shops selling rugs, spices and lanterns are more redolent of a Middle Eastern souk than a Spanish city.

With time, I'd recommend the short bus ride to the La Cartuja monastery, which has a truly extravagant Baroque interior, the statues, gilding, marble and frescoed cupola are breathtaking.

From the city I headed west, crossing the remote high plains to Alhama de Granada. The familiar

REMARKABLE LOCATIONS



Almería's desert is a movie star, while the city is gloriously atmospheric

Did you realise that Europe's only desert is in Andalucía? Clint Eastwood, Peter O'Toole and Harrison Ford certainly know this.

Spaghetti westerns were so called because director Sergio Leone was Italian, but perhaps they should have been named paella westerns because several were filmed in Almería – in the Desert of Tabernas, to be precise.

The "badlands" of Spain proved an ideal body-double for America's Wild West in such movies as *For A Few Dollars More*, which starred a young Mr Eastwood.

Leone, though, had been beaten to Almería by David Lean, who filmed parts of *Lawrence of Arabia*, with O'Toole, in the province – though it was some time before Steven Spielberg brought Harrison Ford to Tabernas to film chunks of the adventure film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Among the crumbly, crumpled landscape of the desert, where trumpeter finches and lizards flit among the otherworldly ravines and cliffs, the legacy is there in several old western film sets, carefully recreated or restored and with re-enactments of street shoot-outs held daily.

Even if you're not a big fan of westerns, a visit is great family fun

and the gunfight re-enactments are admirably convincing.

Heading east from the "West", the wilderness continued as I took a small side-road across the Karst en Yesos de Sorbas natural area – a cave-riddled gypsum landscape of tiny table mountains and more ravines quite unlike anything I'd seen before in Spain; as was Sorbas, an age-worn town huddled along the top of a cliff above another strange split in the earth.

I followed the trail of Lean, Leone and Spielberg down to the far south-east corner of Iberia, where brown, misshapen mountains slope steeply into the sea in the Cabo de Gata-Níjar natural park. The rugged valleys and fabulous soft-sand beaches that are the park's hallmarks were also used as backdrops to the directors' films.

Few roads penetrate a wilderness that is arid yet home to several rare plant species. On the western side of the peninsula, I spotted distant pink blobs – flamingoes – on the vast salt lakes.

Looping round to the east, I called at the appealing seaside village of San José. This is the place to stay if you want to attempt the gratifying walk to the lonely lighthouse at "land's end", although the allure of Los Genoveses beach a short distance along the path may well curtail your hike.

A string of tiny villages spot this coast, with Agua Amarga perhaps the prettiest. I popped into a few of them before seeing a sign indicating a beach. A short hop over a ridge was rewarded with a panorama of a



Moorish marvel: the Alcazaba dominates the city of Almería

marvellous golden strand, the Playa de los Muertos – half a mile long and backed by cliffs. Completely undeveloped, there was barely a soul in sight out of season.

Heading north, the road turned inland and upwards as some formidable coastal mountains blocked its path. The next few miles proved a rollercoaster drive to cut across this lonely corner of Spain before civilisation returned, rather suddenly, in the shape of Mojácar Playa, an easy-going resort

that is pasted along several miles of excellent sandy beach.

It was the old village of Mojácar behind the resort that captured my attention. Viewed from the beach, it appears like a dollop of cream on a hill, its white-cube buildings spilling down the sides. Up in one of its old squares, the vistas stretched along the coast and far to the north.

The provincial capital of Almería is one of the least-visited of Spain's coastal cities – a powerful reason for me to take a look. The city is

overwhelmed by its gigantic, 1,000-year-old Moorish castle, the Alcazaba – second in size in Andalucía after Granada's mighty Alhambra. At dusk, I wandered behind its well-preserved walls to inspect the three distinct enclosures – two of Muslim design and one of Christian origin, added later – and gaze out from the battlements across the lights of what is still a key port for Spain. Another great wall

Descending from the castle past the huge and rather stern-looking medieval cathedral, I found myself among the bright lights I had viewed from above, in the modern shopping boulevard of Paseo de Almería, a sharp contrast to the tranquillity of the castle's courtyards.

Dipping down an alley, I was quickly back in old Almería, an experience made all the more authentic by Bodega Las Botas, a gloriously atmospheric place with hanging hams and sherry-barrel tables. It would make a great movie set, I thought.

FROM RICH HERITAGE

TO NATURAL BEAUTY

Annie Bennett finds much to excite the senses in this unspoilt and historic region



I climbed the stone steps in the Calahorra Tower and took in the view across the Guadalquivir river to the monumental heart of Córdoba, which is dominated by the Great Mosque. From my vantage point in the 13th-century watchtower, I looked at the locals strolling, running and cycling along the riverbank and wondered if they ever become blasé about their city's magnificent skyline.

A thousand years ago, this was the foremost city in the Western world, with a million inhabitants and paved streets that were lit at night, and this rich heritage is evident today in just about every step you take as you wander around the cobbled lanes.

I crossed the Roman bridge and walked up to the Mosque, which dates from the 8th century. I must have spent hours over the years weaving in and out of the columns – there are 850 of them – under the undulating rows of horseshoe arches, but the experience is never the same. My eye is always caught by something I have never noticed before in the ornate decoration that was crafted centuries ago by the skilled artisans who came to the city from Damascus and Byzantium.

Back outside, I was drawn into the labyrinth of the Judería, the former Jewish quarter, following the curving walls of whitewashed houses and peering through the wrought-iron gates into tiny courtyards cooled by fountains and decorated with hand-painted tiles.



Crossing the centuries: Córdoba's Roman bridge; olive oil; the Great Mosque

The best time to visit Córdoba is in May, when many of these flower-filled patios are open to the public.

Although a lot of visitors never venture beyond the city, there is plenty to explore in the province of Córdoba too. I am particularly fond of the Sierra Subbética, south of the capital, which is the centre of the entire region of Andalucía.

One of the best places to appreciate this is the hilltop known as the Balcony of Andalucía which, at 3,993ft, is one of the highest

points in the area. The Virgen de la Sierra chapel stands on the summit, marking the site where the Madonna is said to have appeared.

On a clear day, you can see four of the eight provinces of Andalucía – and that's not counting Córdoba itself. I could certainly identify the jagged, snow-covered peaks of the Sierra Nevada to the south-west.

After a beer in the bar next to the chapel, I set off to walk to the village of Zuheros, where I was staying, following the course of

the Bailón Gorge. Kestrels glided across the blue sky and I spotted a pair of peregrine falcons.

The last part of my walk was uphill, climbing the steep crag on which Zuheros stands, crowned by a ruined castle. This is one of the prettiest villages in Spain, all steep lanes of white two-storey houses with red painted roofs and flowers spilling off balconies.

After panting my way up to the little square that is the heart of the village, I dived straight into a bar for

a glass of chilled *montilla fino* and some tapas. Montilla is similar to sherry but is made in Córdoba and has its own Designation of Origin.

I ate some goat's cheese marinated in herbs and olive oil, which was made in the village. Oil is the major product of this area and is also an essential ingredient in *salmorejo*, a thick version of gazpacho that is a speciality of Córdoba.

I went to learn more about olive oil in the town of Baena, at

the 18th-century mill owned by the Núñez de Prado family, who make one of Spain's most coveted oils.

While connoisseurs would not dream of consuming anything less than a cold-pressed oil, at Núñez de Prado they collect the oil that seeps naturally from the ground olives, so it does not even undergo the pressing process. If you ever wondered what all the fuss was about olive oil, just taste this one and you'll understand why. It is Andalucía in a bottle.



RENAISSANCE JEWELS AND FRAGRANT OIL

**Remote, rugged
and steeped in
history, here's
where ancient
traditions are
still coveted**



Emerald green oil was dripping off the huge slab of toast and drizzling down my chin, but I didn't care.

When you are having breakfast at a pavement café in the city of Jaén, with the winter sun on your face, enjoying the moment is more important than minding your manners. The peppery aroma tickled my nostrils, while flavours reminiscent of grass, apple and tomato hit my tastebuds.

The province of Jaén has the greatest concentration of olive trees in the world – more than 60 million – and produces almost half of Spain's olive oil. No matter how fond you are of butter and marmalade in the morning, when in Jaén you just have to emulate the locals and pour their fragrant oil liberally over your toast.

Finishing my *café con leche* (which also smelt pretty good), I was all set to mooch around the city. I started with the Jaén Museum, which has the best collection of Iberian art in Spain. Looking at the elegant limestone sculptures of animals and warriors, mostly found at a site near Porcuna in the west of the province, it was difficult to believe they were created around 2,500 years ago. Some looked as if they could be the work of Picasso.

From there, I jumped forward in history to the 11th century at the

Arab Baths – hidden away in the basement of a Renaissance palace – which are the largest in Spain.

I learned that after Ferdinand III took control of the city from the Moors in 1246, the baths continued to be used by Muslims from Monday to Thursday, Jews on Friday and Christians at the weekend. Sounds like a highly civilised arrangement to me.

The reconquest of Andalucía had actually begun earlier that century, at the battle of Navas de Tolosa in the north of Jaén province. This year is the 800th anniversary of the landmark battle, which took place in mid-July of 1212 and changed the course of Spanish history when the Castilian soldiers of Alfonso XIII overcame the Almohad army of the Caliph al-Nasur.

There is now a museum on the site in an exceptionally beautiful landscape – even by Jaén standards, which are pretty high – where there is a programme of events throughout this year to commemorate the battle.

I wandered through the labyrinth of cobbled lanes in the old part of Jaén, flanked by little shops and bars, eventually emerging at the magnificent cathedral, which is one of the most beautiful Renaissance buildings in Spain. Designed by the great Andrés de Vandelvira in the 16th century, construction continued for another 200 years.

Renaissance splendour is not just found here in the capital of Jaén province, however. Royal connections and riches from the New World also brought a brief

small towns about 30 miles to the north-east of the city in the area known as La Loma. Dozens of lavish palaces were built in a short time and remain as a living testament to their moment of glory.

The next morning, I drove across a mesmerising landscape of row after row of olive trees, their leaves glinting silvery-green in the sharp winter sun, to have a look at two of these historic towns.

Only five miles apart, Baeza and Úbeda share an astounding architectural heritage. As well as the Renaissance jewels, there is a wealth of Moorish, Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque monuments. It is hardly surprising that they both have Unesco World Heritage status.

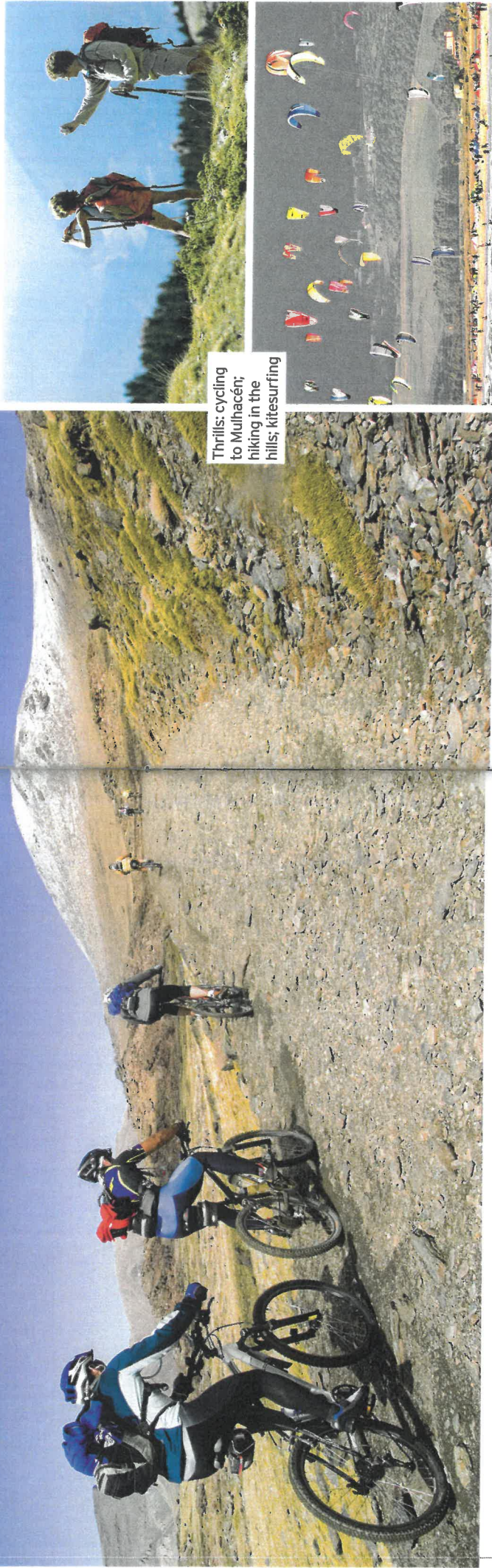
In Baeza, while having a coffee in the porticoed Plaza de la Constitución, I read that in the early 20th century the great poet Antonio Machado had taught at the university, where his classroom has been preserved just as it was in his day. I also read that he had been a regular at the Mercantil, the very café where I was now sitting.

I continued to Úbeda, driving along an almost empty road flanked by olive groves. Like Baeza, its squares are framed by palaces and churches in honey-coloured stone.

The focal point of Úbeda is the Plaza de Vázquez de Molina which, with its impressive churches and palaces, is a contender for the title of the most beautiful square in Spain. Reason enough to head up to this noble province.

Green and pleasant: Jaén has swathes of olive groves





Thrills: cycling to Mulhacén; hiking in the hills; kitesurfing

LANDSCAPES TO SUIT

Check out the region's feast of active options from windsurfing to hiking, says John Wilmott

I came across the Dutch couple as the trail up the valley squeezed into a narrow gorge. "You can't go any further," they said, sadly, "because of the river." I laughed, buried my walking boots under a bush, donned some plastic beach shoes and headed off straight up through the bubbling waters.

Having read about the route along the River Chillar near Nerja, in the under-explored Axarquía, I had come prepared.

The river gurgles between walls that in places are so close together you can touch both sides. Little more than knee-deep, it burrows

into a landscape that becomes increasingly steep, with several small waterfalls to negotiate.

Another time, I stood with my back to Iberia's highest peak, the 11,400ft Mulhacén, its dusting of snow shining in the diamond-bright sun. Ahead was the blue haze of the Mediterranean melding into the sky.

From the village of Capileira high in the Alpujarras, the southern foothills of the Sierra Nevada, I had descended into the Poqueira gorge past chestnut and fruit trees, their leaves burnished to a copper tone. It's a splendid walk down to the river that carved this impressive ravine.

A few days later, I found myself leaving behind a gaggle of tourists at the lighthouse to head along one of the loneliest coasts in Europe, around the Cabo de Gata-Níjar in

Almería province, where the tall hills drop straight to the sea. With the tang of spray in the air from the waves bouncing off spiky rocks below, my goal was one of this natural park's wild beaches.

On my most recent visit to Andalucía, in the great limestone mass north of Marbella, I enjoyed a delightful riverside ramble. Indeed, the entire area up around the villages of Ronda and Grazalema is outstanding for walkers of all abilities, with old drovers' trails linking those exquisite *pueblos blancos* (white villages) teetering on ridges and hills.

I should add that all the above walks took place in December or January, and all in sharp sunlight. In spring, the landscapes are coloured by wildflowers; later

in the year, by the palette of autumn. Local tourist offices can advise on walking routes, but I'll suggest a few less well-known places.

The Axarquía to the east of Málaga has possibilities from gentle valley walks to heady ridge scrambles. In Jaén province, the Sierra de Cazorla is one of the great undiscovered mountain regions of Europe. The Sierra Norte, within easy reach of Seville, has beautiful riverside paths and woodlands choked with wildlife. And don't forget the Costa de la Luz, where great sweeps of sand and unspoilt dunes are ideal for family strolls.

Cyclists are almost as well served as walkers as the Spanish are mad keen on pedal power. The coast offers the best chance for flatter rides, though do check a good map

to find the smaller lanes. A fine option for those without tree-trunk thighs are the 12 Vías Verdes (Greenways), which are old rail routes now turned into cycling and walking tracks; bike hire is usually available in a nearby town.

As for mountain biking, there are hundreds of miles of single-track and wider routes across the region, along with adventure companies who will take you and your bike to the top of the hill so you can freewheel back down, drinking in the delights of the countryside.

With such a varied topography, from mountains and chasms to plains and a golden coastline, it is hardly surprising that almost every outdoor activity can be enjoyed in Andalucía. As well as the hiking and biking, there really is something for

everyone; from those who thrive on adrenalin to more leisurely pursuits.

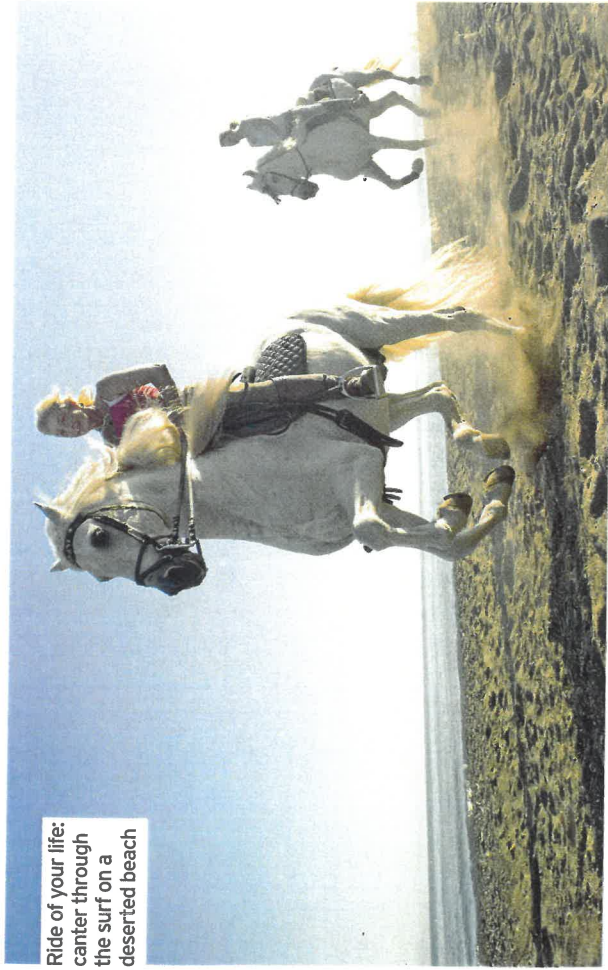
The sport most associated with the region is golf; Andalucía is one of the world's premier destinations. Valderrama at San Roque, a former Ryder Cup venue, was voted top course in continental Europe by *Golf Monthly* last year.

For those whose prowess matches their passion, there are many other top-drawer courses such as Sotogrande, Finca Cortesin and Las Brisas. Málaga and Cádiz provinces are the powerhouses of Spanish golf but there are plenty more courses across the region, many of which will accept green fees and rent clubs.

Some courses will provide a real talking point in the clubhouse back home; try Desert Springs near

OUTDOOR PURSUITS

Ride of your life:
canter through
the surf on a
deserted beach



Almería, which as the name implies has cacti and dry river beds among its hazards. For mountain views, head for Club de Campo de Córdoba, where you're likely to spot wildlife as well as birds.

Horsemanship in the region dates back hundreds of years and there are plenty of stables and schools offering guided rides, with several providing tuition from BHS-qualified staff and accommodation.

There's terrain to suit all abilities, from rugged hill and forest hacks to cantering through the waves. Some of the trails were used as mule links between towns and villages in days gone by and have been maintained for riders' enjoyment today.

With its steep ridges and reliable thermals, Andalucía could have been designed for paragliders. Jump-off points – and schools – are spread across the region. The Sierra de Algodonales north-west of Ronda, the Sierra de Cazorla in Jaén province and Loja, west of Granada, are just three sites. If you prefer to keep your feet

in contact with terra firma, then the region has superb canyoning and climbing. Limestone gorges through which the rivers run from mountain to sea provide the territory for both.

Canyoning is well-practised in the natural parks that surround Ronda, with the Cañón de las Buitreras (Vulture's Canyon) – hundreds of feet deep yet just a few feet wide – a highlight. Other popular spots for guided expeditions are in the Alpujarras and along the course of the Río Verde north of Almúñecar.

One of the top places for rock climbing is the huge canyon of El Chorro, an short drive from Málaga. With 500 miles of coastline, it's no surprise that almost all types of water sport are on offer. Tarifa, the southern tip of Spain, claims to be the European capital of windsurfing and kitesurfing, and you'll see participants sizzling across the water as the narrow gap between Europe and Africa creates strong breezes. For calmer conditions, head west along the Costa de la Luz. In the far east of the region, the wide

sands around Mojácar Playa are also favoured by windsurfers.

There's excellent diving for both the qualified and the novice. Off Tarifa, the waters of the protected Isla de las Palomas harbour octopus, conger and a few wrecks. At the wild Cabo de Gata-Níjar Natural Park in the south-east, guided boat dives can be arranged to see coral, moray, barracuda and seahorses. The seas around Nerja have good quality boat diving, again in a protected marine reserve.

Cádiz and Huelva provinces are the place to head for whale and dolphin watching. The Straits of Gibraltar see a lot of cetacean traffic, including pilot, sperm and fin whales along with common and bottlenose dolphins.

All this, and there hasn't been room to discuss caving, potholing, quadbiking, hot-air ballooning or even the water parks for those who simply want a fun family day out.

For more ideas, visit www.andalucia.org or www.spain.info

LITTLE DISHES OF JOY

Annie Bennett savours the very best food and drink the region has to offer

I started with sea urchin topped with caviar and a fried quail's egg. Then I tried slinky squid ribbons and asparagus wrapped up in bacon, followed by a stack of wafer-thin layers of tuna and courgette.

While I was deciding what to have next, I ordered another glass of Botani, a fabulous white wine from the Jorge Ordóñez winery in the Axarquía mountains in the province of Málaga.

The surprising thing was that these exquisite dishes were not being served in a Michelin-starred restaurant but in Albarama, a stylish yet informal bar in Seville.

There is something of a revolution going on in Andalucía when it comes to tapas. A new generation of gastrobars is appearing throughout the region; chefs are reviving traditional recipes and creating elegant new tapas using the huge range of excellent local produce.

Seville now has some of the best gastrobars in Spain. At the very popular La Azotea, they have one menu that changes every season and another that changes every week to take advantage of the best ingredients available.

I've tried different things every time I've been there, including tuna tataki on guacamole, Ibérico pork with Basque Idiazábal cheese sauce,



Small but perfectly formed: tapas are presented in imaginative ways

and salt cod and wild mushroom cannelloni with scallop sauce.

However, while I am a big fan of the gastro tapas trend, sometimes you just can't beat the tried and tested formula of somewhere more traditional.

In Seville, one of my favourites is the no-nonsense Bodegaña Romero, a tiled bar where everyone orders the *pringá*, a squashy toasted roll stuffed with pork and morcilla sausage, and maybe some *torillitas de camarones* – crispy fritters flavoured with the tiniest shrimps.

On the beaches of the Costa del Sol, bars set up barbecues to grill freshly-caught sardines on skewers. With salad and cold beer, that has to be the perfect summer lunch.

Further along the coast in Cádiz, the smell of fish frying wafts out of every bar. Order a *ración* to

share, along with a glass of bone-dry fino or manzanilla. If you aren't used to drinking sherry with food, Cádiz is a good place to start.

Everywhere in Andalucía you will come across gazpacho, which comes in infinite varieties. The smooth, chilled soup is most usually made with tomatoes, garlic, olive oil and bread, but often also contains peppers, cucumbers or onions.

The thicker *salmorejo* is a speciality of Córdoba, but has now become fashionable all over Spain. In Málaga, *ajoblanco* is a silky emulsion of almonds, garlic and oil, often served with a few grapes or chunks of melon.

In fact, you could travel around Andalucía just trying different versions of gazpacho – a fine way to get an idea of just how varied the region is in other ways too.

FUN ON THE FRIENDLY SLOPES OF THE SOUTH

Peter Hardy enjoys the snow and the convivial company in the sparkling Sierra Nevada

It was almost 4am when I finally tore myself away from my new-found friends and stumbled out of the crowded bar into almost 20 inches of fresh powder.

"Don't go," said one of my Spanish companions, "we should properly celebrate the new snow before we ski it." The trouble was that if I celebrated it any more, I wouldn't be skiing it today at all. Up here on the roof of Andalucía, 20 miles from and 4,800 vertical feet above the city of Granada, time seems to transcend its normal parameters. I felt like I'd been in that bar for at least 12 hours.

The Spanish ski well but they party even better and want everyone to join in – especially in the mountain resorts.

Bleary-eyed at 9.30am, I made my way towards the main access lift. The skies had cleared and Sierra Nevada looked at its most sparkingly magnificent.

As I passed the same still-crowded bar, three figures at the window cheerfully raised their glasses to me. In Andalucía, they just don't do things by halves.

In a country more associated with sand and sangria than snow

'The Spanish ski well but they party even better and they want everyone to join in'

Come aboard: the Sierra Nevada is great for both skiers and snowboarders and has facilities to cater for most abilities



and ski, you don't really expect to find a major winter sports resort set just inland from well-known beach destinations. But in Sierra Nevada in the spring or late autumn you can sunbathe – or even swim – and slalom in a single day. Sand and snow are less than two hours apart.

It's billed as Europe's most southerly ski resort – not strictly true if you count Mount Etna in Sicily and the Troodos Mountains in Cyprus – but it is the furthest south on the mainland and the most important of the three.

Back in the late 19th century Angel Ganivet, an eccentric writer and diplomat from Granada, found himself posted to snowy Helsinki. He wrote home to his friends telling them that Sierra Nevada was the Finland of Spain and they should build a ski resort. And that's pretty much what they did.

These days it has 22 mainly high-speed lifts and 66 miles of varied pistes for all standards.

In character it is neither alpine nor classically Spanish. The main part of the resort is Pradolano, a pleasant combination of hotels, shops, restaurants and open spaces that stretches freely across the base area. Twin gondolas take you up to the mid-station at Borreguiles.

From here, further lifts spread out across the mountainside. From the 11,148ft top of Veleta on a

glorious day you can see across the Straits of Gibraltar all the way to the Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Their proximity is emphasised when occasional sand storms blow in from the Sahara and turn the snow a delicate shade of yellow.

This is wonderful intermediate ski terrain, with one of Europe's most sophisticated snow-making systems as back-up when nature fails to fully produce. When the snow does fall, the lack of humidity means that it usually arrives as perfect dry powder.

The occasional storms at this altitude can be severe and sensible skiers seek sanctuary in the bars and restaurants of the resort itself – or head down to Granada. In winter the courtyards and grounds of the Alhambra are much emptier than in the summer.

Back up the mountain, there's a wide choice of hotels including everything from the four-star Meliá Sol y Nieve, Sierra Nevada and Kenia Nevada to stylish apartments and simple hostels.

You can eat outstandingly well – I recommend Ruta del Veleta – and then there are all those bars, 16 of them at the last count. With all the skiing and partying, finding time to sleep is the only problem.

For more information, visit www.sierranevadaski.com

SUPERLATIVE ROOMS,

SUPREME VIEWS

Enjoy the exclusive experience of overnighting in a significant building or a stunning location

Would you like to stay in a castle, a palace, a monastery – or a stylish modern hotel with an outstanding view? The paradors of Spain are a nationwide network of government-owned hotels, selected or created to offer a special experience.

Most have a pool and all have a top-quality restaurant that offers regional cuisine and wine. A central booking system means you can make your own itinerary, with the guarantee of a hotel each night that is a destination in itself.

Here are Andalucía's paradors:

GRANADA It's a real privilege to stay here, actually within the mighty walls of the Alhambra, one of the world's greatest historical sites. The parador is in a 15th-century monastery with some rooms looking out across to the Generalife palace and gardens. There's a galleried courtyard and many other outstanding original features.

RONDA Enjoying one of the most spectacular settings of any hotel, this parador teeters on the edge of the gorge next to the New Bridge. Most rooms have good views; some on the top floor have a terrace that almost hangs over the chasm. Public rooms are smart and elegant, and the food in the restaurant is superb, even by parador standards.

CARMONA The crowning glory of a town that's crammed with historical delights is the 14th-century castle in which this parador is set. There are distant vistas from its terrace or from the rooms and a colonnaded internal courtyard with fountain,

while the restaurant is in the old refectory with vaulted ceiling. The bus to Seville takes 45 minutes.

AYAMONTE From the balconied rooms here, you can see more of Portugal than of Spain. The smart building sits on a hill just outside the small town with panoramas across the Guadiana river that divides the two countries. The best bits are the stylish lounge and grassy terrace.

MAZAGÓN Set above what may be Europe's greatest wild beach – some 30 miles long in total – this stylish parador enjoys a private

walkway down to the pristine sands. It's in the Doñana protected area and is convenient for exploring the national park or for the Columbus territory near Huelva.

ARCOS DE LA FRONTERA A sublime combination of authentic charm and a majestic setting, this former palace has mesmerising views, especially from the balcony rooms that overhang the enormous cliff. Check out the beautiful courtyard and antiques within.

NERJA Enjoying its own private lift down to the beach, this modern

parador has spacious grounds and is a short walk from the lively town's much-loved Balcon de Europa promenade and its cafés and shops.

MÁLAGA GIBRALFARO Right next door to the castle at the top of the hill, most rooms here have commanding vistas over the city, while the café terrace attracts locals on summer evenings.

MÁLAGA GOLF Next to a top-class 18-hole golf course – the oldest in Andalucía – and a nine-hole links is this handsome hotel with a restaurant specialising in seafood.



A class above: paradors at Ronda, left; inner Moorish courtyard at Arcos de la Frontera, above; Granadà, below



ÚBEDA At this former Renaissance palace, in certain rooms you can open your shutters to gaze at one of Andalucía's most perfect plazas. Guests can admire the galleried courtyard and elegant staircase, plus a menu that features local game.

JAÉN Stay in a superbly restored old Arabic fortress up on a ridge above the city. Inside, the arched main hall is especially impressive, as are the balconied rooms.

CAZORLA Elegant country house surrounded by natural beauty in a protected area about 15 miles from

the town. There's an interesting natural history exhibition inside, too.

CÓRDOBA Modern and peaceful, just outside the city beside the mountains, with lovely gardens.

MOJÁCAR A stylish oasis in the heart of this popular seaside resort, just steps from the beach.

ANTEQUERA Close to the old town with outstanding modern facilities, a good centre for touring by car.

For more information and to book, visit www.parador.es

CELEBRATE AT A FIESTA FOR ALL SEASONS

Get into the carnival spirit in 2012 at one of the thousands of festivals held in Andalucía

From week-long spectacles to ancient traditions in small villages, the chances are you'll be able to join a celebration. Some events are marked across the region, while others are peculiar to one place. While many festivals have a religious significance, even those will have a celebratory element. Here is a small selection:

JANUARY

THREE KINGS PARADE

On January 5, the eve of Epiphany, processions are held in cities and towns, in which sweets and small presents are thrown from elaborately decorated floats.

FEBRUARY

CÁDIZ CARNIVAL

One of the largest carnivals in the world, this extravaganza is influenced by that of Venice, with which Cádiz was a major trading partner. Over several days there are parades, flamenco displays and the satirical performances of the *chirigotas*. People flood the streets day and night, plus there are fireworks displays galore.

EASTER

SEMANA SANTA

Seville hosts the grandest Holy Week pageants, followed by Málaga

and Granada. Expect processions in which decorated floats holding Jesus and Mary figures are carried through the streets, marching bands and other costumed groups marking various historic events.

APRIL

FERIA DE ABRIL, SEVILLE

One of Spain's biggest fairs, with carriage parades, music and dancing. The main event is held in an open area just outside the city – where hundreds of decorated *casetas* (marquees) are set up by families or groups, others for the public – with live entertainment including *sevillanas* folk music. Consumption of manzanilla sherry and tapas are obligatory.

MAY

JEREZ HORSE FAIR

The FERIA del Caballo is the main chance of the year for the beautiful Andalusian horses of Jerez to be displayed at the fairground, an event that dates back to the 16th century. Visitors admire the horses and riders from the comfort of *casetas*, indulging in fine sherry. In August, horse-racing takes place on the beach at nearby Sanlúcar, while Jerez holds a sherry festival in early September.

CÓRDOBA PATIO FESTIVAL

The traditional homes of Córdoba have central courtyards to provide a cool space with plants and water features. Each May, many private

homes and public buildings open their patios to the public, each competing to put on the most luxuriant display.

VIRGEN DEL ROCÍO

For one weekend a year, sleepy El Rocío near Huelva attracts up to a million people in one of Spain's most revered pilgrimages. Many come by horse and cart, accompanied by drums, to pay homage to the ancient wooden statue of Madonna of the Dew.

JUNE-JULY

GRANADA MUSIC FESTIVAL

A long-standing international fixture that attracts leading orchestral and ballet performers (though flamenco doesn't miss out), set in the Alhambra and Generalife gardens as well as smaller venues.

AUGUST

MÁLAGA FAIR

The people of Málaga can thank Isabella and Ferdinand, who took the city back from the Moors in 1487, for this enormous party. It's one of Spain's ultimate fiestas, with music, dance, parades and a fireworks display that's one of most spectacular in Andalucía.

FAIR OF ALMERÍA

The city's patron saint is deserving of 10 days of revelry, with concerts, children's games, equestrian events, dancing and a pottery exhibition. Almería is also a great place to attend the midsummer Night of San Juan, when bonfires are lit.

OCTOBER

FERIA DE SAN LUCAS, JAÉN

Originally an agricultural fair, this event now includes sporting and cultural aspects as well as grand carnival parades marking various events in the city's history.

For details of all festivals, visit www.andalucia.org and www.spain.info



Equine elegance: horse and rider at Jerez Horse Fair